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RUCNOSC/OSCE POST COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 0017
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0053
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 1660
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0378
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 0018
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0464
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA PRIORITY 0001
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 0008
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 0037
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 0001
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 0013
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 0339
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC//J5/RUE// PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHUNV/USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA PRIORITY 0022

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000369

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY), OSCE FOR AMBASSADOR FINLEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/10/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: MARY, BALKANABAT RFE/RL REPORTERS ALIVE AND DEFIANT

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Classified By: Amb. Tracey A. Jacobson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (SBU) PDOff visited Mary Radio Free Europe/Liberty (RFE/RL) stringers Ovezmuhammet Hommadov and Jumadurdy Ovezov April 6. Both are in good condition but continue to deal with cut-off telephones and harassment by local authorities. Balkanabat stringer Shamurat Akolyev visited the embassy on April 7 and said that though his phone line still was disconnected, he was able to report to RFE/RL. End Summary.

PDOff Meets with RFE/RL Stringer Hommadov

2. (SBU) On April 6 PDOff arrived at Hommadov,s home outside Mary city and received an enthusiastic welcome by Hommadov, his family and two others) the Director of Mary NGO &Hemayat8 (a USAID/Counterpart partner) Kurban Bugrayev and a local Counterpart grantee. According to Hommadov and Bugrayev, Hummadov and Ovezov were in regular contact with Mary American Corner Director Albina Burashnikova as well as with Bugrayev whenever Hommadov traveled to the American Center) colocated with Hemayat) or Bugrayev visited Hummadov at home. Ovezov,s home is located a two-minute walk away from that of Hommadov in the same farming commune. Both of Hommadov,s BCTI cell phones are cut off)- the newer number of the two was cut off April 5, 2006 -- only days after Hommadov received the number and used it to call the embassy to arrange the April 6 visit. Hommadov said that his neighbors are too scared to cooperate in lending him phones either to contact the embassy or file reports for RFE/RL. Hommadov requested embassy assistance in obtaining another

SIM card.

Ovezov, Hommadov Clans Gather to Criticize Government

13. (SBU) After talking with Hommadov, PDoff walked with Hommadov and accompanying family and friends to the home of Ovezov where Ovezov openly greeted all the group in his courtyard before continuing the meeting inside his home. Ovezov has no landline or cell phone access and, according to Hommadov, is too ill to travel into Mary city on a regular basis. Ovezov was standing and appeared energetic and in high spirits, but complained of pain and swelling in his midriff (he had swathed his waist firmly with fabric) related to a pre-existing kidney disorder for which he underwent surgery over a decade ago.

14. (C) Ovezov ranted against President Sapurmurat Niyazov, accusing him of shady business deals and condemning him for a range of economic and social policies harmful to the Turkmen people. Ovezov frequently referred back to business deals he had conducted in 2003-2004 with GOTX support or at least tolerance) which he subsequently lost) and which formed the basis for several radio broadcasts he produced for RFE/RL. Ovezov showed PDoff letters from business partners in Turkmen and Russian indicating sums of money. Ovezov also produced a letter from a former U.S Embassy PAO from May 2004) when Ovezov was director of the private enterprise &Zaman8) responding to his request for financial support and informing him the embassy was unable to help him. (Comment: This discussion was a bit murky, but Ovezov clearly has an ax to grind with the GOTX based on his failed business dealings. End Comment.)

Jail Treatment

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15. (SBU) Both stringers said that they were not physically harmed while in jail, and that they had bread to eat during their incarceration. Ovezov told PDoff that the cold conditions in jail exacerbated his preexisting kidney condition by intensifying the related pain in his back and midriff swelling. He received no medical treatment while in jail and is treating his condition now with herbal home remedies.

Stringers Committed to Resisting Continued Harassment

16. (C) Hommadov and Ovezov both reported that a meeting of district level decision makers took place before April 5 -) including the local police and security services -- instructing them to keep the pressure on both stringers. Hommadov reported that on April 5 he received a visit by the local mullah, who urged him and his family to cease communicating with RFE/RL and threatened to condemn them as bad Muslims if Hommadov and his family had any contact with RFE/RL. Hommadov reported that during his March 7-15 detention until approximately March 20, plainclothes police or Security Services were stationed at either end of his street surveilling his house. Hommadov reported that this surveillance appears to have ended on the 20th. Hommadov described his reports to RFE/RL as reports on social conditions such as the price of produce and meat in the local markets, wages and pension issues, as well as concerns that the Government of Turkmenistan had not adequately addressed the threat of Avian Influenza to Turkmenistan. Hommadov told PDoff that the local authorities warned him not to report on &constitutional8 matters.

17. (C) Ovezov reported a visit on the morning of April 2 by two or three plainclothes police or members of the local security services who told Ovezov to end his attempts to contact RFE/RL and who demanded that he pay a fine of "\$68

million" (sic) which apparently had something to do with Ovezov,s personal business dealings. The men, who declined to give their names, reportedly suggested that the United States itself was an enemy of Turkmenistan and that it had meddled maliciously in world affairs) e.g., Chechnya and Iran) therefore Ovezov,s contact with RFE/RL, and by extension the U.S. Government, suggested that Ovezov was antagonistic to Turkmenistan. One of Ovezov,s male relatives reported saying to the officials, &we are not afraid of you8 and emotionally repeated this fact several times during the meeting with PDOff. Ovezov expressed concern that the community,s fear of consorting with members of his family had isolated his children and spouse. Ovezov claimed that the monetary &fine8 the plainclothes police attempted to elicit from him on April 6 was a gross exaggeration of &debts8 he incurred from the Government of Turkmenistan. He also suggested that the debt itself was unfair.

¶18. (C) Despite this harassment, both Hommadov and Ovezov declared their continued desire and intention to continue working with RFE/RL. Hommadov produced a brochure from Radio Turkey and said that he has begun to work with RT. During the visit with Hommadov, the Counterpart grantee present also expressed a wish to begin working for RFE/RL and sought PDOff,s advice on how to transmit information given his lack of a mobile phone and/or fax.

Stringer Ovezov's Request for International Assistance

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¶19. (C) Ovezov expressed his gratitude to European governments and that of the United States for exerting pressure to obtain his release from prison, and hoped for their continued support. He also urged continued attention to the cases of (psychiatric hospital detainee) Gurbandurdy Durdykuliev, (PEN Award nominee and black-listed author) Rahim Esenov, and Ashgabat-based RFE/RL stringer Halmurad Glychdurdiyev and stressed that his and Hommadov,s arrests were both &illegal.8 He requested help in obtaining reliable access to a phone/fax line, preferably via a satellite setup, and voice-activated dictaphones for both himself and Hommadov to assist in their reporting activities.

¶10. (C) Ovezov claimed that he and his family &do not live, only exist8 due to a lack of funds. He also requested assistance from PDOff in finding a way for a friend of his to safely deposit \$1 million.

¶11. (SBU) An Ashgabat OSCE representative is slated to visit the homes of both stringers on April 7.

Balkanabat Stringer Checks in, Places World Cup Bet

¶12. (C) Balkanabat stringer Akolyev paid an unannounced visit to the embassy on April 7 where he met with PolOff and PDOff to confirm that his home phone line was not functioning and that the local post office has been unhelpful to him in his attempts to call RFE/RL Prague to transmit reports. Akolyev, a cameraman and coach, approached RFE/RL in October 2005 and offered to become a stringer. He reports on sports but also social issues such as problems with traffic police, GOTX tree-planting initiatives, and the price of commodities such as flour. His phone was cut off on December 30, 2005 and since then he has attempted to transmit his reports to RFE/RL using post office facilities in Balkanabat. He reported that his neighbors were too frightened to help him by allowing him to use their home phone. He also said that the local authorities have not directly approached him about not working for RFE/RL, but that local mullahs paid his father a visit to urge him -- as a Muslim -- not to cooperate. He also said that local authorities created an atmosphere of fear in his community and urged his neighbors to ostracize him. Nonetheless, he said, he was not afraid of this pressure

and would continue to try to transmit reports to RFE/RL.

¶13. (C) Emboffs urged him to report to embassy officers if and when he has problems and told him that an embassy representative would plan to visit him soon in Balkanabat. Akolyev encouraged this contact on the basis that heightening his profile with the local authorities could serve to protect him from higher levels of harassment. On Akolyev,s @ular8 visits to Ashgabat he collects his RFE/RL salary, visits Ashgabat stringer Gylychdurdiyev, and transmits his reports to RFE/RL among other tasks. This was not the first such visit Akolyev has made to the embassy.

Comment

¶14. (C) There RFE/RL stringers cleared seemed to understand the risk they were taking on by agreeing to work for RFE/RL. They appeared willing to accept the harassment involved and in some respects also seemed to enjoy the attendant publicity. Embassy encouraged them to keep us informed of their status. The GOTX use of local mullahs to join in the harassment only underscores the complicity of the local Islamic clerical establishment with the policies of Niyazov's regime.

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JACOBSON